



# Blended Teaching and Learning at Higher Education Institutions in South Africa: Law Students' Experiences

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**Abstract.** Teaching and learning since time immemorial were situated face to face, with the educator being the ultimate narrator in the chain of passage of knowledge. Students travelled far and wide to acquire knowledge at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Students became teachers when they returned to their places of origin. So, the chain continued. In 2020, the world experienced such a grave pandemic that all doors, literally, were closed. Voices were muted and a new dawn of teaching and learning was born. Educators and students rapidly adopted Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and online teaching and learning. Against this backdrop, educators and students were forced to engage differently. Making use of online tools, such as Blackboard brought into being a variation of didactic and autodidactic experiences. The study used a case study design, where a purposive sample of Law students was surveyed to elicit their experiences of blended learning. The findings reveal that the students preferred the online component over face-to-face classes although it was quite clear that they were at a contact teaching university. Recommendations emanating from the findings include the need for curriculum redesign, for a sound blended learning experience. The findings of this study may inform HEIs of similar contexts that are on a mission to design blended learning courses.

**Keywords:** Blackboard, Blended Teaching and Learning, Didactics, Students' Experiences

## 1 Introduction

The teaching and learning landscapes were significantly transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic forcefully ushering in a new way of teaching and learning at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). Not only was South Africa forced to explore new ways of HEI education, but the world itself was seized with a new epoch of education. Some speculate that being confined to physical spaces paved a path of self-learning, whilst others speak of an impetus spurred by sheer boredom. Regardless of the impetus, teaching and learning have been fundamentally transformed and equally enhanced through the integration of learning technologies into pedagogical practices in general and constructivist pedagogical approaches in particular.

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Technology as a panacea has gathered increasing momentum with the publication of several seminal texts, [1; 2; 3; 4] describing today's students as radically different to previous generations both in their exposure to and expertise with technology and their resultant learning preferences and educational requirements. These students, known interchangeably as Net Generation, [3; 4], Digital Natives [2; 5], Millennials [6; 7] and Homo Zappiens, [8] have grown up with technology (computers, the Internet and mobile devices) as a way of life—utilising online collaboration sites such as Facebook to communicate, collaborate and generally run their lives — the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of learning technology in enhancing the student learning experience [9].

This paper explores the specific aspects of blended teaching and learning at the university being studied. In so doing the paper sets out didactic and autodidactic learning, and constructivism, stating the intended objectives. This is followed by the description of the case study, methodology, discussion of the findings and conclusion and recommendations.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Didactic Learning**

According to Merriam-Webster, pedagogy is the “art, science, or profession of teaching.” This broad definition covers various aspects of teaching, and many moving parts of pedagogy including teaching styles, feedback, and assessment. The term pedagogy boils down to the study of different teaching methods [10]. There are 5 different pedagogical approaches, namely the constructivist approach, the collaborative approach, the reflective approach, the integrative approach, and, finally, the inquiry-based approach [11]. Marius-Costel writes of pedagogical principles. These principles are as follows:

- The principle of the pedagogical communication

The principle refers to the ability to effectively bring across knowledge through teaching in the classroom. Communication would invariably mean that the teacher should be able to communicate the presupposed knowledge in a manner that is understood by the learner. In this manner, the learner can critically analyze, respond to, and explain the content taught. Intrinsically, pedagogical communication depends solely on teaching capabilities that widely encompass language, dialect, terminology, pertinent jargon, and the creation of a platform that is suited to the learner's audience.

- The principle of the pedagogical knowing

Pedagogical knowing considers several salient factors such as prior formal education, the acquisition of a higher educational qualification and the internal understanding of trite teaching principles. This is inclusive of adequate theoretical and practical training.

- The principle of pedagogical creativity

Where the teacher grapples with knowledge transfer and assimilation, this pedagogical principle calls for a creative approach which is context drive. Whilst considering the needs of the learning experience, a careful balance must be struck between content sharing and learner-specific needs.

- The principle of the pedagogical materialisation

This principle is the culmination of the teaching goal that embraces formative and summative assessments, which vary in form in each discipline. The discipline will inform the methodologies and tools which must be employed to ensure effective knowledge transfer. The manifestation of this principle finds itself in the learner's response. For example, in the medical teaching discipline, content is bolstered and further demonstrated by practical situations which teachers have experienced, personally, or vicariously. In the end, materialization is the ability of the learner to actualize the content in real-life scenarios [11].

Marius-Costel also lists the didactic principles as follows:

- The principle of the conscious and active participation of students in the education process

More often than not, undergraduate studies are tainted with a “jug in the mug” method assumed by learners which defeats the purpose of teaching content. In this context, the learner simply accepts the teacher’s content without any engagement, criticism, or questioning. The learner is aided in the didactic process through direct content sharing, guidance, engagement, and evaluation which is a teacher-centred instruction where the learner is more passive. These salient features distinguish the didactic from the autodidactic process.

- The principle of thorough acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities

Now, this principle is learner-specific which is dependent on the learner’s intellectual, critical, and discerning abilities. This principle of thorough knowledge, skills and abilities in part is teacher informed. However, the balance is successfully achieved through the learner’s creative, critical thinking and argumentation skills. Skills transfer is only possible when the learner makes use of these skills. These three facets are closely intertwined and must be harnessed with the willing learner.

- The principle of connecting theory with practice

This principle may be aptly summed up by referring to medical education, once again: a cardiac thoracic surgeon cannot successfully perform cardiac surgery if the theory has been effectively taught and studied. This theoretical knowledge requires practical participation in the operating room through practical observations and self-participation. Theory and practice cannot be divorced from each other; they are two sides of the same coin.

- The principle of accessibility and individuality

This principle comprises two essential elements, namely, accessibility and individuality. Accessibility refers to both the teacher and the learner. Teachers should have access to ongoing training and development to meet the learner's situational demands. The teacher should consider the learner's circumstances that go to the heart of learning. For example, a dyslexic learner will have a robust and voracious command of the language in explaining content material by speaking but will encounter endless obstacles when tasked to note the content on paper or screen. In this instance, socio-economic influencers are also a pivotal concern that must be given due regard.

- The principle of systematisation and continuity

Systemization is the navigation tool for the learner, wherein the teacher provides a roadmap for content learning and the learner can logically follow processes that are important to the educational environment. Here, notifications of class time, assessments, examination admission and the like along with a course guide allow the learner how the teaching will ensue. Such systematization, if correctly in place, forms the bedrock for continuity in education.

- The principle of intuition

Intuitive learning defines the ability to suddenly understand something without the need for conscious analytical or logical reasoning [12]. Each educator is presented from minute to minute with information-rich circumstances, under various institutional constraints, which present innumerable opportunities for generating both general and specific educational value. Whether or not novice teachers begin with good natural instincts, they, like Simon's novice physicists, lack rich experience "frozen into habit," indexed and cross-referenced in long-term memory. They are thus more likely to focus more on explicit goals and objectives and be guided by explicit curriculum guides and lesson plans and are also likely to be more efficient and effective by reliance on these explicit procedures. Experienced teachers, on the other hand, like Simon's experts, have a rich body of experience that guides them in scanning their immediate circumstances for opportunities and then rapidly and flexibly responding without the explicit mediation of consciousness to generate educational value. When they are relatively free of institutional constraints, their work can exhibit intuition.

Didactic teaching, structured discussion, and guided performance do not exist for their own sake. Their purpose is to pack in a heavy dose of concentrated experience, and then, through drill and repetition, freeze it into a habit and make it accessible for spontaneous use. As Einstein put it, "education is that which remains when one has forgotten everything learned in school" [13].

- The principle of reverse connection (of feedback or retroaction)

Once learners have been presented with the teaching content, they are expected to critically engage with the content. Critical engagement is contingent on intuition for both the teacher and the learner. However, the learner must then provide feedback in the form of assessments, which may be quizzes, essay writing, critical analysis, or a subject-dominant assessment type. This feedback permits a reverse connection between the teacher and the learner, whereafter the teacher can evaluate the learner's learning experiences.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages – The Relationship Between Didactics and Educational Psychology**

Key to the success of didactical teaching is understanding the student's educational psychology. At the outset, the author is cognizant of the interplay between education and South Africa's unique history, which invariably has a significant impact on the student's psyche thus creating a tension between current pedagogical approaches and the didactic traditions. Some of these factors are:

#### 1. Socio-cultural views

Students' thinking is shaped by their ability to interact in society and the opportunities that they are presented with. Socio-cultural views in South Africa are typified by the need to succeed, to demonstrate success through the acquisition of wealth that is seen by society; and accordingly praised. Culturally, students hail from different parts of South Africa like the urban, peri-urban and rural with the latter exhibiting signs of struggle not only with the Net generation but also with cultural assimilation of the urban and peri-urban counterparts [14]. This tension is exacerbated by higher educational institutions becoming blindsided by such problems which eventuate into obstacles in the educational environment. Unfortunately, South African society is ridden with wealth being the determinant of the graduation from a boy into manhood.

#### 2. Student suitability – apathy and excitement are both sides of the same coin

Many students are excited to obtain a higher education degree, but some lack enthusiasm due to a sense of entitlement displayed by the Net generation. Although the desire to study law may seem genuine, a closer look reveals that it is often driven by societal expectations and norms, rather than genuine passion. Furthermore, many students only focus on meeting the minimum requirements to obtain their degree, without truly engaging with the material.

#### 3. Financial constraints, transport and accommodation

Financial constraints, transport, accommodation, and other logistical constraints impact the student's ability to focus on their education. These hindrances are real.

#### 4. Interactionist views, teachers' beliefs and conceptions

Added to the already existing challenges, the student holds different views on interaction, engagement, and study methodology from the teacher, that stem from individual beliefs and conceptions, especially in South Africa. When met with these views and beliefs, the teaching environment suffers a severe teething phase.

There exist four primary perspectives on mathematics education, each featuring a unique teaching methodology. These include (a) A learner-centric approach that centres on the individual's construction of mathematical knowledge; (2) A content-driven approach that places importance on grasping the concepts, while being driven by the content itself; (c) A content-driven approach that values student performance and the mastery of mathematical rules and procedures; and (4) A classroom-oriented approach that draws on knowledge of effective classroom practices [15].

Medical schools in England have found that online teaching with various online platforms frees up classroom time, which is most advantageous to students [16]. Students would welcome more opportunities for case-based, problem-based, and team-based exercises — strategies that activate prior knowledge [16]. Teachers would be able to teach, rather than merely make speeches [16]. Digital media allows for the easy creation of video lectures that offer flexibility so that students can watch at their own pace and, as such, has gained increasing popularity in HEIs. This must be taken with caution as law students engage differently with different needs for legal practice.

Heuristic teaching methodology is critical for law students creating an environment that allows for the mind to foster critical thinking through shortcuts to problem solving. Essentially, law students are trained at law schools to solve legal problems by making use of particular tools that ensure a routine culture of thinking as its starting point. Being equipped with these tools, students can navigate almost all legal problems. In this manner, the successful law student is enabled to practice successfully. It is common knowledge that law students are open and accepting of this type of educational psychological grooming. For example, a legal problem is made much easier to tackle if the summary of the relevant facts from a client is attained. The next step is to identify the relevant area (s) of law. Once the issues are secured, the successful law student proceeds to search for the relevant and applicable law. Thereafter, the law student applies the relevant and applicable law to the relevant facts, thus producing an answer to the legal problem. The conclusion being legal does not necessarily mean that it is the correct approach for the client. The successful law student must employ discretion to determine whether a purely legal solution is the correct approach; or whether the legal solution needs to be accompanied by pragmatic thinking. Heuristic thinking is attained through regular encounters in the lecture halls whose importance cannot be overestimated.

If the student misses one of the steps outlined above, then the success of the law student is at peril. Thus, the lecturer persistently and continuously provides examples of real-life situations to train the law student appropriately and adequately. If these steps are not grasped by law students, there is no other mechanism to secure solutions to legal problems. Now, we may state that this is endemic to all disciplines. However, it must be borne in mind that critical and applied critical legal thinking is specific to law students which manifests in the working environment. Failing at this stage would mean a

simple regurgitation of the law without meaning. No court of law or client would accept such legal counsel.

## 2.2 Constructivism and Student-Centred Learning

Education comprises teaching and learning, both of which are basic and distinct processes in education and complementary to each other [17; 18]. Over the 21st century, education has undergone a notable pedagogical shift, moving away from a teacher-centred approach to one that is centred around the student. Additionally, constructivism has gained increasing importance, emphasizing the significance of meaningful learning to the learner and the integration of new knowledge into existing frameworks. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the significance placed upon the concept of constructivism, which highlights the importance of learning as a result of meaningfulness to the learner, as well as the integration of new understanding and knowledge into pre-existing frameworks [19]. Applying pedagogical knowledge in actual life involves understanding learner needs. Creating efficient pedagogy necessitates the creation of engaging and dynamic learning environments, the implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies, the provision of timely and constructive feedback, an ongoing process of reflecting on teaching practices, and the cultivation of positive relationships across multiple domains and levels of complexity [20].

## 3 The Case Study and Methodology

The case study focused on the Faculty of Law (Nelson Mandela School of Law) at the University of Fort Hare. Data was generated from a purposive sample of students from this faculty. Six hundred students completed the Blackboard survey that was administered. The questions attempted to elicit students' experiences of blended teaching and learning and Blackboard usage, which is a web-based virtual learning environment and learning management system developed by Blackboard Inc (Blackboard online teaching tool). The study aimed to address the issue of students struggling to attend classes, and staff members being concerned about student absenteeism at lectures, assessment points and tests.

Table 1 below has the questions that students were asked.

**Table 1.** Survey Questions

1. Do you attend contact classes?
2. Do you attend online classes?
3. Do you make use of Blackboard? If so, how often?
4. Do you consult other online material such as TED talks, YouTube and such? If so, which online material do you access?
5. Do you choose to attend online classes?
6. Do you choose to attend contact classes?
7. Do you find interaction is better online or in person?

8. What does online offer you that contact does not?
9. What prevents you from attending online classes?
10. What prevents you from attending contact classes?
11. Do you have access to other texts that are not available on Blackboard?
12. What type of classes would you prefer, going forward?

## 4 Findings

Less than 10% of the total class attended contact lectures. When questioned as to why this was the case, many referred to socio-economic issues, while some indicated that were employed and thus, did not have time to attend classes. However, the remarkable comfort for the students was that the lectures were recorded on Blackboard. As such, they were able to access the audio lecture recordings at their leisure. Approximately 20% of the students actively participated in the online lectures in real-time. These students were full-time learners with no outside job commitments, allowing them to focus on their studies. On the other hand, the remaining 80% of the students found the audio recordings on Blackboard to be sufficient for their learning needs. When asked about their level of engagement during lectures, nearly 87% of the students reported that they did not have any questions or doubts. The lecture recordings contained all the essential information needed to excel in their assessments and earn their qualifications. For the remaining 3% of students, online and in-person consultations with their instructors were still available, making real-time lectures unnecessary.

Almost 83% of the student participants stated that they made use of Blackboard, citing it as their most reliable link to the course content and other logistical information necessary for the completion of their studies. Blackboard, according to them is their teacher. The actual teacher is simply there in cases of academic emergencies, which are mostly during assessment periods. According to this 83% of the sample, students approach their lecturers closer to assessment periods to clarify course content or to query the outcome of their assessments. These learners consulted Blackboard daily. Also, because Blackboard issues an email notification about posted content and everything associated with the course, Blackboard did not take up much of their time. On one hand, most of the participants felt that they did not need to consult other online sources as the essential core course content material was available on Blackboard. This was the response despite outside material being placed on Blackboard by their lecturers. On the other hand, 0.01% of the participants consulted online sources. This group explained that they had an interest in the subject and desired self-improvement. Their desire and curiosity led them to engage with further online course content not prescribed by the curriculum.

A majority (75%) of the participants chose to attend online classes. Actual real-time attendance depended on whether students had sufficient rest, food, accommodation, and connectivity or data. They explained that their nights were mostly spent socializing on campus, or at university residences which were part of their university life experience. Accordingly, if they woke up early, they would attend class online. If they overslept,



they would find some other time to engage with the online content and activities. Ways of financing their studies also impacted their affordability, in terms of buying data, and paying for accommodation, food and other basic needs.

Approximately 16% of the cohort chose to attend contact classes, making all the necessary arrangements to ensure timely attendance. They stated that they were not only excited to attend class but that they also took their studies seriously. They further stated that their primary intention in registering for the qualification was to secure a better life and follow their passion. The qualification would elevate their socio-economic status and allow them to materialise their dreams. The dream, oddly enough, was not merely the attainment of a qualification but a means of a higher standard of living for themselves and their families. Admittedly, they made frequent use of Blackboard, but they considered the personal interaction in contact classes more important than online classes.

Almost all (97%) reported that the contact class interaction is more useful and provides better quality than the online interaction, citing reasons such as too many students online at the same time and varying degrees of participation (some being introverts). Although Blackboard protected their introverted nature, contact classes allowed them the opportunity to break their silence. The data revealed that online classes improved the ease of access at convenient times; various circumstances pertinent to socio-economic issues prevented students from attending classes; less than 2% of the participants had copies of prescribed textbooks and other prescribed materials for the course. The majority focused on access to Blackboard's audio lecture recordings. Furthermore, 85% of learners stated that online classes were better for them despite a full payment of tuition fees. They went on to state, when asked about open-distance online universities, that the university is a contact-based university with a specific political history. This is the reason they elected to pursue studies in it.

In descending order of importance to students, they carried out the following activities on Blackboard: downloading lecture audios; downloading lecture notes; completing multiple choice quizzes and case studies; reading prescribed textbooks; holding discussions with lecturers; accessing other material for feedback; accessing extra reading material; class discussions; and lecture attendance. Interestingly enough, learners displayed their commitment to knowledge acquisition with a firm reliance on Blackboard. The learners demonstrated an almost negligible concern for lecture attendance in comparison to their access to Blackboard so much so that they would pay attention to Blackboard closer to assessment periods with little or no attention prior thereto. This is alarming because there is inadequate engagement and social constructivist activities taking place. Lecture attendance ranked number nine on the list, with downloading Blackboard lecture audios ranking number one. When questioned as to real-time or close to post-lecture downloads, the students stated that downloading from Blackboard was at their convenience and needs based. The needs-based approach is informed by assessments and evaluations. This also explained the flurry of consultation requests closer to the assessment period.

Moreover, what was of concern was that learners waited until a day or two before the assessments were due, to establish consultations with educators. Educators place the case studies or similarly situated case studies, and quizzes on Blackboard, which is voluntary for learner engagement and participation. What was seen was that only eighty students attempted a few of these assessment exercises. These learners stated that the reason they attempted to respond to the assessments was that they assumed that the assessment evaluation would count toward their final qualification grading. When the learners discovered that the assessment evaluations would not count toward their final qualification grades, they did not participate in future assessments that were uploaded onto Blackboard.

However, all the assessments that counted toward the year mark were attempted by more than 90% of the students. Those students who did not undertake the assessment held valid reasons for missing the assessment. These reasons were attributed to sick leave and family commitments beyond their control. The students completed their tests and assignments online. They had a week to finish their assignments and around 67% of them cross-referenced material from other courses. For instance, they answered questions on Administrative Law using Constitutional Law material. Additionally, they used readily available online resources from Google instead of relying heavily on lecture notes. Surprisingly, students performed better in the assignments than in the tests. During the test, students were given ninety minutes, and less than 5% of responses were from Google searches. Most of the responses (68%) were pre-prepared and uploaded onto Blackboard, with just over 20% of students answering the questions in a sit-down test format.

## **5 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The relationship between students and educators is the principal determinant in teaching and learning. This collaboration makes education a meaningful and sustainable experience. The survey has highlighted the varying learning experiences of students. The findings reveal that Law students are predominantly facing socio-economic challenges that impede their learning. Although incorporating a blended learning platform seems to enable flexible learning for students, educators may need to pay attention to the curriculum design, more particularly, concerning blended learning. Given that law is an intricately taught subject that is context-driven, students may attend theoretical classes in person, and practical classes be held online. It is suggested that this balance will be responsive to student needs, at least in the first phase of a law degree, namely the first two years with a re-evaluation of sustainable learning thereafter. Necessarily, this approach will entail a deeper understanding of the student challenges which means that the University must embark on responsive programmes. Additionally, the Law Faculty and educational qualifications authorities must engage in consultation so that a cohesive approach meets the criteria demanded by qualifications authorities. More research must be undertaken for continued assessment. This comprehensive approach would undoubtedly result in positive outcomes, leading to an improved educational experience for the students.

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